

# An Evacuee's Story: Port Isaac 1939

by George Harris

## The Journey

The old steam train pulling out of Chiswick main line station is packed with children of all ages. The mass exodus had started all over England from the major cities and towns that were about to become targets by German bombers.

With a luggage label tied through the lapel of my little raincoat with just my name on it, the obligatory gas mask in a pressed cardboard box strapped over my shoulder, I was just one of millions of children evacuated to the safety of the country. I was just four years old and did not really understand a lot of what was happening, but to be going on a train journey for the first time in my life was exciting. Being so young I was lucky enough to be accompanied by my brother Fred, who was twelve.



George on Fred's shoulders, c1940

We were part of a big family from Brentford, on the outskirts of London. Our family consisted of five boys and five girls, I was the youngest boy. I had two sisters that were younger than me; they would eventually join me in Port Isaac.



Mrs Hancock's bungalow

## John Glover

Mrs Hancock owned a bungalow very near the top of Church Hill, a wooden framed building, clad in planking, painted green in those days, the roof was galvanized sheeting painted red, which we eventually moved up to from Middle Street, and we had now been joined by our two younger sisters, as there was more room for us all.

Church Hill is very steep and having to walk up and down it every day certainly kept us fit. I remember one severe winter the hill resembled a glacier, it had snowed for a few days and then it froze solid. Our journey to school meant clinging on to bushes and grass on the hedges to get down to the village. The bungalow had a very big garden, planted with all the vegetable produce you would ever need. She kept two pigs in a sty, a chicken run and coop for an egg supply, which she would sell at times.

She employed a big Cornishman who sported a big bushy grey beard, a very placid man, but strong called John Glover, and he looked after things for her at the bungalow. John used to sleep in the loft with us, after my brother Fred had gone back to Brentford to start work. My brother Jim then joined me at the house, after he had stayed at one of the family Browns houses. He had been staying there with my other brother, John, who had to return home as well.

A bizarre thing happened one night when Jim and I were tucked up in bed, and John Glover got into his own bed, his candle was always the last one to be blown out, and it was a source of amusement to watch him huff and puff with his whiskers almost touching the flame. But for some reason this particular night, he didn't seem to have enough puff to blow it out. So he said to Jim, "could you blow the candle out for me, boy", and they were the last words he ever uttered, because poor old John died in his sleep that night. We didn't know fill we came home from school the next day, we did think it unusual when we got up, but we thought he was just having a lie in.

## Winter Time Is Herring Season

The fishermen of Port Isaac were hardy souls, and in all winters throughout the year but in winter it was particularly hard. Mrs Hancock would get me up early to send me down the harbour some mornings even though it was still dark, with a newspaper.

I would watch for the sign of a slowly swinging mat lamp coming in through the breakwaters. That was what I and many other people from the village were waiting for. The boat would be so low in the water it was almost sinking, with the weight of the fish, piled so high the fishermen would be up their waists in herring.

The boat would be grounded and a fisherman would leave the boat in his high waders with a basket of herring. He would ask you to hold open your newspaper while he filled it with beautiful fresh herring. The fisherman would charge four old pence, which is the equivalent to a third of five pence in 2010! We practically lived on herring for a while.

## A letter from Mrs Hancock

I'd been back home for roughly a year when a letter arrived from Mrs Hancock. It was a request to my mother asking if one of the children would like to come back for a year. I was the chosen one, so back I went to the old bungalow and back to my old school. My good friend Terry Thomas was there so every thing was fine with me. I was physically very fit and I'd grown up somewhat so the fishermen trusted me to look after their punts. These were small boats that ferried the fishermen to their fishing boats.

We would scull the men to their particular boat and that punt was ours for the day. The fun we had on these during the day, there would be say four or five lads with a boat each having mock battles, playing pirates, in and out of caves when the tide was in etc. The thing you had to do was watch for your particular fishing boat coming in to moor up. Our job then was to scull out and pick up the crew and you helped to haul the punt up the beach, such fun.

## Jack Rowe and Shirley Collins

My wife and I have in the last few years taken holidays in either Devon or Cornwall, and on each visit we have managed to get to Port Isaac for a day. The place holds so many memories for me and on each visit; so far, we've run into Jack Rowe.

Jack and his brother Peter used to serve me with Mrs Hancock's Daily Herald and my Beano and Dandy comics in their mothers paper shop during the war. We enjoyed a cup of tea with Jack on one visit and it was good to talk over old times.

At the old school in the forties was a little girl called Shirley Collins (now Mrs. Glawwin). She would follow me around Shirley happened to have any sweets. On one of our visits I was lucky enough to meet Shirley when she was working in the Post office. She said she did not remember that, but it was a pleasure talking with her again.



The Harris boys: left to right: Fred, George, Jim & John

## Oil Lamps And Candles

Our bedroom at 13 Middle Street was in a loft conversion, to get to it you had to climb a wide step ladder. Fred would carry a candle in an old fashioned candle stick holder carefully up the ladder to light our way.

Under our bed was a chamber pot that was our toilet, which had to be emptied every morning in the one toilet downstairs. Number 13 in those days was connected to the house next to it, which had a window that looks like a shop front that was our front room; you went through this room to get to the toilet.

This room was used as a film set in the early episodes of the television series of Doc Martin; it was the pharmacy with the lady in the neck brace.

Oil lamps was our main source of light and it seemed quite sufficient back then. Mrs. Hancock would read her paper by it and I don't remember her wearing glasses.

## Friends

The best friend I had in Port Isaac was a lad called Terry Thomas, we went everywhere together, it was either mucking about in the harbour or working on a farm at harvest time.

It was Terry that introduced me to a rare treat, it was when the fishermen were tarring their nets, this was a practice they did every year to preserve them. In a building close to the fishermen's cabins at the top end of the beach, they had a big vat of tar, under which they built a big fire; the nets would be dipped in the vat for a while, then taken out and draped over the curved wall which protected the cabins from high tides. You can still see some of the tar to this day. Our special treat was placing a potato in the fire to cook, while we warmed ourselves by it. The best baked potato you ever tasted!

On one of our visits recently, I asked Jack Rowe about Terry, and he told me he had passed away about ten years ago, he was my best friend.

## The Harvest

Harvest time in Port Isaac meant everybody that could work was expected to help. So we were sent off to which ever farmer was cutting his corn. Mrs Hancock would pack our lunches, usually half a Cornish poshy, an apple and a bottle of water. Our job would be to follow the tractor and collect the sheaves as they were thrown out. We would then stack them into stacks about ten feet apart. Seen from a distance a field would look quite picturesque. It was fairly hard work and we would be glad to take a break at lunch time. We would sit by a hedge in the shade to eat and rest.

A field of corn is cut around the outside to the middle, which means as the corn is cut it's slowly reduced to a small square in the centre. The rabbits that live in the field all retreat to that small square, when it becomes overcrowded they all rush out in every direction, that's when the fun begins. We would chase and catch as many as we could, we were taught how to deal with them humanely and these would be taken to the farmer. When our days work was finished he would give us two rabbits each, which in the war years was excellent pay because rationing was at its height.

## 1945: The End of the War

The massive headlines in the paper said it all, 'The War is Over!' the Union Jacks are flying all over England - street parties abound- people are dancing and laughing, big pictures of Winston Churchill with his cigar and V sign fill the papers. It's over!

Now we have to leave Port Isaac, our safe haven from the horrors of war, but my memories of the village will always be with me. I will be forever grateful to dear Mrs Hancock for my time there.

## The Chapel

The chapel in the village is now the Port Isaac Pottery run by Billy and Barbara Hawkins. It is also the rehearsal studio for the Fishermen's Friends singing group. Billy and Peter Rowe are both part of the group. I'm so glad the old place is thriving and isn't so many churches and chapels in the country falling in to ruin.

## Starting School

The infants' school was at the top of the village close to the living garages, the hall served not only as a school but with the floor waxed and polished, as a dance hall. It had a stage at one end and this was put to good use when school concerts were put on. I remember one occasion an evacuee we all called Parky Wakeling, sang a duet with a very pretty girl from Port Isaac called Nesta Sweet. She had a lovely voice and the love song they sang brought the house down, they did it so well. The Wakeling family lived in the same road as my family in Brentford and are distantly related to my wife.

Miss Dawes was our teacher at the school, who had a habit of saying 'shut!' Even when we were being quiet! Miss Dawes would shush at us, which often amused me.

My brother Fred went to the main school overlooking the bay, the headmaster was Boss Richards I never knew his first name, and he became my headmaster when I eventually went there.

One morning when I must have been about seven, he asked me if I would like to ring the bell to summon the pupils to their classrooms. He pulled the rope down slowly for me to hold and said "Give it a good pull", which I did and still holding on tightly to the rope I was lifted two or three feet in the air, to his great amusement, I'll never forget that.

## The Battle of the Atlantic Comes to Port Isaac

The main school at Port Isaac overlooks the bay, the wall along the cliff top is very close to the edge. When I was there, the bushes and foliage that's grown over the last seventy odd years was not there, so you had a very clear view of anything happening in the bay.

On one occasion we were told to go to the playground by our teacher, as something was going on in the bay, the whole school was leaning over the wall that day. Being rowed slowly through the breakwaters was a lifeboat, with maybe twelve or fourteen men who looked very tired. It was low tide and the boat eventually beached just inside the breakwaters. One of the sailors then jumped off the bow of the boat onto the sand with a bottle in his hand. The man stood still for a minute, then taking a long gulp from the bottle he fell face down to the sand completely exhausted.

I turned out to be the crew of a Breton ship that had sunk out in the Atlantic.

The people of Port Isaac (who are sympathetic to any seagang person) billeted these men all round the village and cared for them. A letter was sent from the Breton government thanking the people of Port Isaac for their kindness. The letter was posted up in a seafront window for sometime. Incidentally, I have since been told by a historian that the letter can be found on display in a Cornish museum.

## The Town Platt

The town platt was a meeting place for the folks of the village. If you come down to the town of a summer evening, it was not uncommon to see the fishermen, sometimes eight or ten abreast, walking backwards and forwards across the platt chattering to each other. This was their entertainment as in those days there was hardly any radios, and television was something that had not been invented.

An old building behind one of the garages at the top of the village was turned into a temporary cinema. A man would come once a week with a newsreel and a film and that was the highlight of the week.

## Mrs Hancock

The train journey lasted for most of the day, and both Fred and I were feeling very tired as the train slowed to a stop in Port Isaac Road Station. We left the train and stood on the platform with several other children in an orderly group. A lady in an official capacity armed with a clipboard, called out our names and duly ticked them off as we answered. The group then boarded a coach that would take us into the village itself. The coach came to a halt at the top of the hill above the village and we all got off. I think the building that was stopped by was called The Methodist Hall, and this was soon going to be the infants' school.

The group then followed the lady down into the village, where she would stop at certain houses and ask the occupants if they would be willing to take in one or two evacuees.

The group slowly thinned out to leave just Fred and myself. We found ourselves standing outside number 13 Middle Street and the official lady knocked on the door.

When the door opened there stood Mrs Hancock and the official put the question to her. She smiled and said "Well come on in then, I'll get you something to eat". That was the start of five very happy years for me.



Mrs Hancock

It did not take us long to settle into our new home, Mrs Hancock made us very welcome. She was a wonderful cook and you could not wish for a nicer person to look after us.

Mrs Hancock was a Methodist by religion and my Sunday was mainly taken up by visits to morning Sunday school, then chapel at 11.30. Then it was home for lunch, followed by Sunday school in the afternoon and back to chapel for evening service at 6.30. The chapel used to have guest clergy taking the service, some preachers could make stories from the Bible quite interesting, but at other times it could be hard going for the evacuees.

## Debris in the Harbour

These were exciting times for us, but it was a perilous time for the poor sailors making the warships and freighters that made up the massive convoys. The German U-Boats were sinking so much shipping that lots of debris was finding its way into Port Isaac.

We came down to the beach one morning to find hundreds of crates floating in, some were intact and others were broken. We thought it was our lucky day as the crates were full of chocolate bars. But the joy was premature as the chocolate was so impregnated with salt that it was inedible.

One man in the village unsuccessfully tried boiling the chocolate and skimming the salt off the top. Everyone was disappointed to find that nothing could be done to render the chocolate edible and it all got taken away by the council.

At times we would come down to the beach and find big wooden life-rafts washed up. The rafts all smell very salty, it was obvious they had spent a long time at sea. We would climb aboard and hunt through the cupboards that lined the inside and usually find the survival rations untouched. The ships they had come from must have met a sorry end.

## The Sea Plane

On the corner of the town platt is an old wooden post and I was standing by it when I heard the roar of an aeroplane engine. It was a seaplane coming in through the breakwaters on its floats, as it reached the sand its wheels took over and it headed straight for me. I did wonder if the plane would never stop and I was mesmerised by its enormous propeller.

The plane eventually stopped about ten feet from me and the pilot cut the engine. I discovered that the plane had developed engine trouble and had been looking for a safe haven. It remained there for three days and an armed guard was stationed by it. A mechanic from the nearest R.A.F. airbase was sent to repair it.

When it was ready to leave, it seemed like the whole village turned out to watch it go. The plane taxied out through the breakwaters and past Lobber Point then turned into the wind. It had three attempts at taking off before it got airborne and it was waved on its way by everybody.

## The Canadians Come To Town

A company of Canadian soldiers were stationed near Port Isaac during the war, and the Golden Lion pub was a very busy place in the evenings. They were friendly and polite and their strip chewing gum was something we had never seen. So they would be pestered every time they came to town by the lads. The Canadians mounted a heavy piece of artillery on the hill above Lobber Point, but I don't remember it ever being fired.

## 1954 The long ride to Cornwall

My brother Jim and I both had 500cc motorcycles in 1954 and we decided to visit Port Isaac again. Our hope was that we would see Mrs Hancock once more. When we got to the old bungalow we found her son Garfield was living there. He told us his mother had gone to live with her daughter in Combe Martin which is further up the coast.

Garfield was the local steam roller driver and he would be on site if roads were being repaired. At harvest time the roller was replaced by wheels and the engine was the source of power to drive the threshing machines. So it was on the bikes once more and we headed north to Combe Martin. I think Mrs Hancock must have heard our bikes because she was standing at the gate as we dismounted. Her first words when she saw me were "well you don't look much bigger now" and laughed. We had nice little chat and a cup tea and we said our farewells.

We received a letter a few weeks later from her daughter, telling us that her dear mother had passed away. She would never miss her chapel on Sunday mornings and evidently she had a fall getting out of a car, she broke her leg or hip and she never recovered. She was in her mid nineties.

